



# Problem-Based Approaches to Online Leadership Development

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## A Crisis in Leadership Succession

As the babyboom generation approaches retirement age, organisations will increasingly need to address the issue of leadership succession. In fact, 50 percent of companies surveyed in a recent study by RHR International reported that they expect to lose 50 percent or more their senior managers by 2010; 15 percent said they expect to lose 75 percent or more.<sup>1</sup>

Many organisations hope to address the problem by hiring replacements from outside the company. However, research has shown that external hires are significantly less likely to be successful than internal hires.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, there is a high correlation between developing high-potential talent from within and the ability to retain that talent.<sup>3</sup> This suggests the most effective response to the looming leadership crisis is a comprehensive succession-planning program for internal talent that includes an effective training component.

## Leadership is About Execution

Organisations understand that it is not enough for leaders to know *what* to do; they need to know *how* to do it. Effective training must provide authentic learning experiences that facilitate the transfer of skills to the workplace. Knowledge without the ability to apply it is merely information.

That is why case analyses have long been a staple of face-to-face leadership workshops, providing participants with the opportunity to learn through the mistakes of others. But for organisations undertaking large-scale leadership-development initiatives, the face-to-face environment is inherently inefficient.

The online environment seemed to offer a solution to the problem of scalability. But many organisations found the promise of so-called first-generation e-learning to be unfulfilled, suffering from a lack of rigor and an inability to incorporate a problem-based pedagogy, and plagued by poor completion rates.

Through an approach called “structured flexibility,” eCornell offers online leadership development that combines the most effective features of the classroom and the online environment. Students in eCornell’s courses are grouped into sections, each of which is led by an instructor. Courses unfold across a period of two weeks, during which time students work at their own pace. The courses are scenario-based, immersing students in authentic problem situations and case studies. To complete the courses, successfully, students are required to complete problem-based assessments *and* contribute meaningfully to asynchronous online discussions. (They are never required to be online together at the same time.)

This approach acknowledges and emphasises the two most important drivers of effective learning:

- *Learning is first and foremost a social phenomenon.* We learn by doing and by having others critique what we have done; by asking questions of our instructor as well as our peers; by sharing experiences, exchanging information, and collaboratively solving problems. eCornell requires its students to communicate and collaborate as a condition for successful completion of its courses.
- *Context (not content) is king.* The ability of participants to transfer what they have learned to the

workplace depends on the authenticity of the situations, scenarios, and problems in which they are immersed during the training.

The results of eCornell’s approach have been impressive. Completion rates for eCornell courses average over 90 percent. eCornell’s corporate clients value the rigor, flexibility, and a problem-based pedagogy that ensures learners achieve the desired outcomes. eCornell is proving that when organisations turn to e-learning to address their training and development needs, they do not need to sacrifice effectiveness for efficiency. As one global client put it: “The schedules of the eCornell courses have provided the perfect blend of flexibility [and] time pressure to encourage [learners] to follow through and not let the course just die without finishing, as has been the experience ... with other programs that had little or no time parameters set around them.” ■

- 1 *Filling the Executive Bench: How Companies are Growing Future Leaders.*  
[http://www.rhrinternational.com/files/RHR.Executive Bench Whitepaper.pdf](http://www.rhrinternational.com/files/RHR.Executive%20Bench%20Whitepaper.pdf).
- 2 *Filling the Executive Bench.*
- 3 “Survey: Few Organizations Are Developing the Leadership Pipeline.”  
[http://www.clomedia.com/content/templates/clo\\_section.asp?articleid=573&zoneid=101](http://www.clomedia.com/content/templates/clo_section.asp?articleid=573&zoneid=101)

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